

TEACHING THE SHENYUN DANCE TECHNIQUE: A STUDY ON UNIVERSITI SAINS MALAYSIA STUDENTS

Jing Xiaochen^{1*}
Nur Hilyati Ramli²

^{1,2} *School of the Arts, Universiti Sains Malaysia*
*jing_xiaochen@student.usm.my**
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ABSTRACT

Chinese dance is a culturally rich and popular art form worldwide. However, its teaching needs to be improved in Malaysia, despite its multicultural population and significant Chinese community. In the last century, ShenYun technique emerged as one of the primary schools that have been used in teaching Chinese classical dance to ensure its form and type standardization. Nevertheless, there have yet to be any attempts to teach Chinese classical dance overseas using the original teaching materials of the ShenYun technique. This paper focuses on measuring the effectiveness of teaching ShenYun dance technique to international students. 22 students from Universiti Sains Malaysia and various cultural backgrounds were selected to learn the ShenYun dance technique for 12 sessions. The evaluation of the student's learning outcomes involved multiple methods. Post-class questionnaires were given to students after every class, and a final questionnaire was given at the end of the course. Local dance experts assessed the students' progress by observing a live performance, while Chinese dance experts evaluated a video recording of the final performance. The data obtained from students were analyzed using frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation to determine the participants' understanding level. At the same time, the data collected from experts was used to evaluate the learning outcomes. According to the study's findings, the 12 sessions of ShenYun dance technique is an effective instructional resource for international students.

Keywords: ShenYun technique, Chinese dance, dance education, teaching, international students.

INTRODUCTION

The origins of Chinese classical dance can be traced back to either the ancient Chinese court dance or the folk dance. In order to develop and innovate the art of national dance after the founding of the People's Republic of China in the early 1950s, dancers extracted dance materials from the abundant Chinese opera performance, studied, sorted, and refined the Chinese martial arts for reference, and referred to the training methods of ballet, etc., and established ShenYun, a set of Chinese classical dance teaching materials. (Feng, 2002; Wang, 2014; Wilcox, 2011). ShenYun is one of the main schools that teach Chinese classical dance, and it has been instrumental in standardizing the form and style of Chinese dance. (Yuan, 2006; Jiang, 2014). Despite the popularity of Chinese classical dance, its instruction remains limited in several countries, including Malaysia (Zhang, 2015). This poses a problem for the country's multicultural population, which includes a sizeable Chinese population (Hii, 2021). In addition, there have been no attempts to teach Chinese classical dance abroad using the original ShenYun teaching materials. This raises questions about the efficacy of teaching international students ShenYun dance technique.

This study aims to evaluate the efficacy of teaching ShenYun dance technique to international students, emphasizing the technique's significance in Malaysia. This study aims to assess the learning outcomes of 22 international students from Universiti Sains Malaysia who have participated in 12 sessions of ShenYun dance technique. The research will analyze data gathered through post-class questionnaires and expert evaluations to determine the level of students' comprehension and the efficacy of the ShenYun technique. This research is important because it fills a knowledge gap regarding the effectiveness of teaching ShenYun dance technique to international students. It also emphasizes the significance of promoting Chinese classical dance education overseas, especially in multicultural societies such as Malaysia. By understanding the effectiveness of the ShenYun technique in overseas teaching, this research can contribute to the development of effective teaching materials and methodologies for the global promotion of this art form.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Teaching Chinese Dance Overseas

There are currently few international studies on the teaching of Chinese dance. The majority of papers on this subject examine the use of dance art in teaching Chinese culture as a foreign language. For instance, Tan (2022) incorporated dance instruction as a cultural activity into teaching Chinese as a foreign language. This study demonstrated that Chinese dance plays a significant role in the cultural teaching of Chinese as a foreign language. The practice of Chinese classes at the Royal University of Thailand demonstrated viability. The case study of The Chinese talent course offered by The University of East Asia in Thailand confirmed the feasibility of Tan (2013) claim that teaching Chinese talent can significantly improve Chinese language instruction. Gao (2012) argued that traditional Chinese dance could be used to convey China's rich culture to foreign students because it embodies the nation's rich culture and history. Consequently, it can be incorporated into the instructional methods of Confucius Institutes.

The body culture of Chinese Classical Dance closely relates to Chinese philosophy and aesthetics. The body representation carries with it profound cultural connotations. As an independent stage art form, Chinese classical dance played a crucial role in defining the new China's national image. Chinese classical dance still has a great deal of unrealized potential for international communication Cai (2020). Zhu (2014) noted that Chinese classical dance ideally exemplifies Chinese dance culture and the Chinese national character. Therefore, its external communication should be vigorously pursued. It proposed “improving the intercultural communication ability of Chinese classical dance,” “rebuilding and developing Chinese classical dance,” and “expanding the intercultural communication types of Chinese classical dance” as means of overcoming barriers to Chinese classical dance's communication with the rest of the world. Tan (2016) examined the promotion of Chinese dance at the Goldsmiths Confucius Institute in the United Kingdom and identified two obstacles: a lack of established teaching materials and differences in dance culture between nations. Therefore, the proposed solution was to select intercultural dance teaching materials and teach with intercultural communication awareness.

Based on the teaching methods explored by predecessors, the premise of solidly developing teaching and research activities. Drawing lessons from excellent international teaching achievements is the way to expand the overseas development space of local culture. The first step of cultural exchange is “experiential participation,” followed by “cultural identity.” Because of different educational and cultural backgrounds, people of different countries and nationalities will have an inherent mentality to understand and measure different cultures when communicating with each other (Friedman, 1994). Using the method of combining theory and practice, the experiential teaching theory is applied to cross-cultural teaching, and the learning circle theory has a certain reference value for teaching activities (Tang, 2019).

Zhang (2015) investigated and analyzed Chinese dance and folk dance teaching methods via comparative analysis and concluded that complementary teaching is advantageous for the overseas teaching of Chinese folk dance. Chen (2020) also pointed out that instead of sticking to a single dance teaching model, other sister art forms are adopted as teaching supplements to explore the multicultural teaching methods of Chinese dance. The overseas teaching methods of Chinese dance vary according to different teaching objects. However, all the methods still return to the characteristics of “emotional stimulation” to stimulate students' inner emotional experience so as to complete the teaching and learning of different cultures, elevate the learning of dance to the aesthetic level, and realize the significance of overseas teaching of Chinese dance.

B. ShenYun Dance Technique

The term ShenYun derived from the Chinese words “Shenfa” (body movement) and “Yunlv” (rhythm), refers to the organic combination of a dancer's physical methods and spiritual substance in performance as it had gradually come to be the core that embodies the essence of Chinese classical dance as well as the ultimate aim that all dancers strive for (Chen, 2018). Although we collectively refer to the training of body method and the cultivation of verve as Shen Yun, further analysis will reveal that it is organically composed of four different and inseparable aspects, namely the core of ShenYun Appearance, Expression, Drive and Rhythm. The structure of ShenYun teaching material is mainly based on refining, strengthening and developing elements; it turns the routine and programmed movements of opera dance and martial arts into elemental and symbolic dance movements (Long & Xu, 2009, p. 6). The body movement method can also be understood as the waist movement method. This movement law with the waist as the axis is analyzed, summarized and refined to all dance movements, making it different from a specific or complete movement and becoming some general elements that is, “Lifting, Sinking, Marching, Leaning, Harboring, Protruding, Shifting and Side-lifting” (Tang & Jin, 2004).

In the 1950s, basic training and establishing a Chinese dance training system were the focal points of Chinese Classical Dance Course development. Nonetheless, by the 1980s, the emphasis had shifted to creating a new dance art form that reflected the national style and the zeitgeist. The introduction of the *ShenYun Course* marked a major turning point in the evolution of Chinese Classical Dance. Since the Beijing Dance School was elevated to the Beijing Dance Academy in 1978, two significant advancements have occurred in developing Chinese Classical Dance as a discipline. The first is the combination of scientific and national training of fundamental skills to enhance the quality of performers and their technical abilities. The second is the inheritance and study of traditional figures from an aesthetic standpoint, developing and evolving by dance characteristics and the needs of the times. This has led to the development of ShenYun, a new generation of Chinese classical dance (Li & Tang, 1993).

The Chinese Classical Dance *Figure Course (ShenDuan)* was established in the late 1970s to incorporate “national style, metrical language, and aesthetic connotation” into the 1950s-required technical skills and functional quality (Wang, 2014). The course was crucial to transitioning from the ShenYun to the Perfection period. Its primary purpose was not to enhance basic training but to train and strengthen artistic expression. In the 1980s, the discipline construction of Chinese Classical Dance shifted from an initial emphasis on “form” to an emphasis on tradition's “aesthetic” inheritance (Jiang, 2014). This change allowed the national dance tradition greater room for growth. 1984 marked the renaming of the ShenDuan to ShenYun. Professor Tang Mancheng, who has taught the ShenYun at Beijing Dance Academy's Education Major of Chinese Classical Dance Department for many years, co-authored the book “Teaching Methodology of SHENYUN of Chinese Classical Dance” with Jin Hao (2004). The book provides the theoretical foundation and structure of the teaching system upon which ShenYun is based. It has paved the way for ShenYun to be transformed into a scientific teaching procedure and method.

METHODOLOGY

A. The Participant's Selection Criteria

The research was conducted at Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), a prestigious research institution in Penang, a northern state on the Malaysian Peninsula. This study examined the efficacy of ShenYun dance teaching content via a 12-session program with 22 female undergraduate students aged 19 to 23. (See Figure 1). The participants' academic backgrounds included Humanities, Biological Science, Management, Education, and the Arts. To ensure diversity, the study included participants of various ethnic backgrounds (see Figure 2).

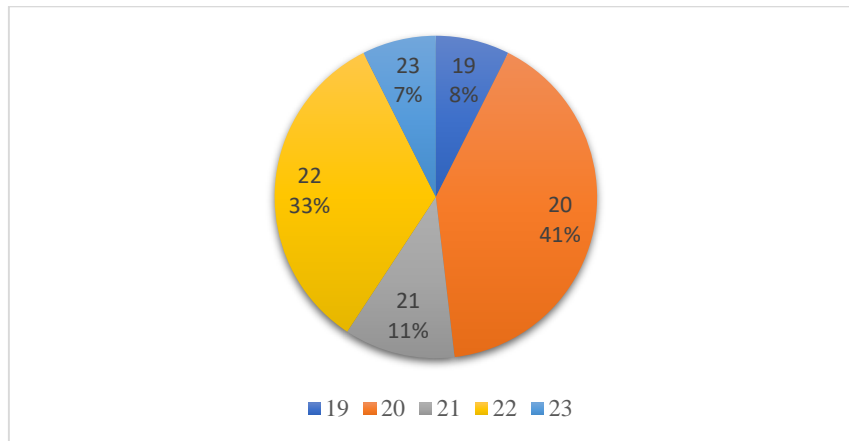


Figure 1. Age of participants

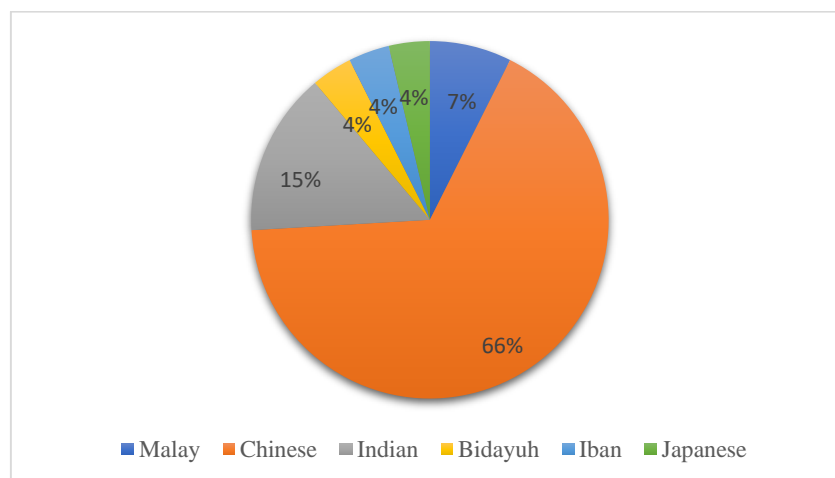


Figure 2. Ethnicity of participants

B. Research Design

The design of this study uses triangulation techniques to conduct mixed-method research, which facilitates the study of the target from different vantage points (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). First of all, mixed methods research through the integrated use of a qualitative and quantitative combination of the two kinds of research methods to help maximize the research study purpose, get two different points of view, quantitative research angle of view from the closure of the data, and qualitative research angle of view from open data, to obtain a more comprehensive perspective, to get more data than using quantitative or qualitative research alone (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Secondly, approaching a phenomenon from different vantage points using different methods and techniques through the triangle technique can more accurately identify various aspects of the phenomenon (Fetters, Curry & Creswell, 2013). The specific process of the whole research is as follows: Firstly, a 12-session teaching plan was

developed through literature research (See Table 1). Then, we spread our poster, which outlined the requirements for prospective participants, including being exclusively female and falling within a specific age group. We get their basic information through the preliminary questionnaire in order to check whether they are eligible. During the 12-session Shen Yun dance class, participants are required to submit a questionnaire at the end of each session, which includes detailed feedback on how well they understood each session.

Table 1: Teaching components

Session	Teaching contents	Attributes
1	Introduction (cultural background) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Basic posture & position of standing • Basic hand patterns, hand positions & postures of hand positions 	Overview of theoretical & Basic terminology
2	Lifting & Sinking (Ti & Chen)	Basic elements
3	Marching, Leaning & Shifting (Chong, Kao & Yi)	
4	Harbouring & Protruding (Han & Tian)	
5	Typical movement 1	Mainstay teaching material
6	Side lifting (Pang Ti)	Basic elements
7	Typical movement 2, 3, 4	Mainstay teaching material
8	Demonstration of phrases	
9	Typical movement 5	
10	Combinations of all ShenYun technique in a dance choreography	Practice & performance
11		
12		

Finally, at the end of the class, the participants presented all learning outcomes in the form of a performance. They filled out the post-questionnaire to fill in the gains after learning the ShenYun dance technique in 12 sessions. Local experts also acted as panels, watching the students' final performances based on the learning results and evaluating the students' learning effects in the form of questionnaires. At the same time, the whole process was made into a video and sent to Chinese classical dance experts for evaluation.

C. Research Instruments

The practice included a pre-questionnaire for participants, a questionnaire after each session and a post-questionnaire, as well as a performance evaluation by a Malaysian expert and a video evaluation by a Chinese expert. The survey was conducted via Google Forms, and the Chinese experts were conducted by online video conference.

The pre-questionnaire is a basic investigation of the background of candidate participants, that is, the participant's age, race, education, major, whether they have learned ShenYun dance, whether they are interested in Chinese dance and culture, etc., in order to make sure that they meet the standards. The questionnaires after each class were conducted using the 1-5 Richter scale to assess participants' understanding of the learning content in each class. Meanwhile, open-ended items were used to understand the reasons for the different understanding levels of participants. The Post-questionnaire provides a multiple-choice format for participants' further understanding of ShenYun dance after passing the entire practical course. At the end of the study, the learning results will be presented to local experts for evaluation in the form of report performance. Meanwhile, video recordings will be made and sent to Chinese experts for evaluation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Participants' Understanding of ShenYun Dance Technique Throughout the 12 Sessions

Table 2 shows the participants' understanding levels for each session, with the best level of understanding and the highest mean score recorded for session 8 (M=5.00, SD=0.00), where the session focused on demonstrating phrases, in which every movement from the previous sessions was combined together. Followed by session 11 (M=4.76, SD=0.562), where the teaching content was turned into a dance work that integrated all ShenYun technique elements. Around 85% of participants understood it well. Combining dance elements and movements in the choreography helped them comprehend the ShenYun dance structure better, as reflected in their journal entries, such as “The last dance made me fully understand everything and understand why we had to learn the elements before” (S12), “I understood everything that was taught and practiced in class today since we practiced our parts step by step” (S15).

In session 10, with the highest standard deviation (M=4.33, SD=0.976), 2 participants (10%) were uncertain if they understood the content, while 1 (5%) could not understand it. Feedback from participants revealed that those who missed a previous class or did not practice enough found it confusing. , participants who did not quite understand the lesson said, “I do not understand the 2nd part of the dance since I missed class the last week and part 3 ”(S18), and "Movement of part 2 is confused maybe I absent class before" (S10). Meanwhile, participants also indicated, "I find it confusing, but I will understand it better if I attend the next class and practice more and more”(S7). This shows that participants can fully understand the teaching content as long as they continuously participate in each class.

Whereas the least preferred category was recorded for session 6 (M=4.18, SD=0.728), which taught “side-lifting,” one of ShenYun's essential elements, 3 of the 17 participants (15%) were unsure if they understood the session. Through participants' feedback, such as "I am having a little trouble understanding this class because I just missed some classes"(S20), we can see that participants who did not attend previous sessions find it challenging to keep up with the technique taught in the next class because the content was related.

Table 2: Understanding of participants in each class

Session	Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Undecided		Agree		Strongly Agree		M	SDV
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%		
1					1	5.3	3	15.8	12	63.2	4.69	.602
2					1	5.3	5	26.3	13	68.4	4.63	.597
3					1	5.3	5	26.3	12	63.2	4.61	.608
4							6	31.6	13	68.4	4.68	.478
5							3	15.8	9	47.4	4.75	.452
6					3	15.8	8	42.1	6	31.6	4.18	.728
7			1	5.3	1	5.3	6	31.6	9	47.4	4.35	.862
8									8	42.1	5.00	.000
9							2	10.5	6	31.6	4.75	.463
10			1	5.3	2	10.5	3	15.8	9	47.4	4.33	.976
11					1	5.3	2	10.5	14	73.7	4.76	.562
12					1	5.3	3	15.8	9	47.4	4.62	.650
Total											4.6097	.2110

B. Overall Participant's Understanding Level

Figure 3 quantitatively analyses participants' perceptions of the program's effectiveness. The overwhelming majority of participants (82%) strongly agreed that the program had helped them understand the ShenYun dance technique, while the remaining 18% only agreed. This level of the agreement further supports the program's success in improving participants' understanding and performance of the dance technique.

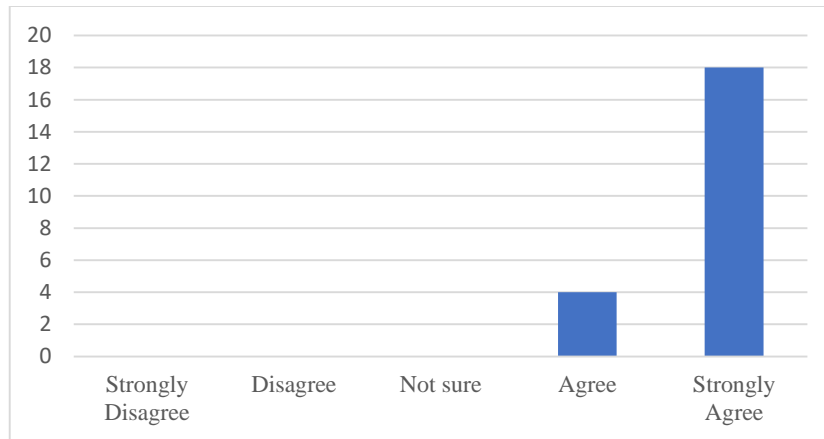


Figure 3. The level of understanding after 12-session

C. Participants Deep Understanding of 12-session ShenYun Dance Technique

The results of the post-questionnaire (Figure 4) show that participants' understanding of the ShenYun technique is based on two main components: basic elements and typical movements. They also gained knowledge about the dance style, choreography, dance phases, combinations, and aesthetic features from the ShenYun dance sessions. Overall, 22 participants completed a multi-choice questionnaire, and 77% of them reported understanding the basic elements and typical movements of ShenYun dance, which were the primary teaching contents of the 12 sessions. Furthermore, 59% of participants comprehended the style and choreography, and more than 50% understood the combinations and phrases of ShenYun dance. The questionnaire also revealed that 45% of participants clearly understood dance's aesthetic features. At the same time, a smaller proportion had grasped performance techniques such as staging and stage orientation. Participants also provided additional insights on topics such as muscle control and stretching techniques in their open-ended responses.

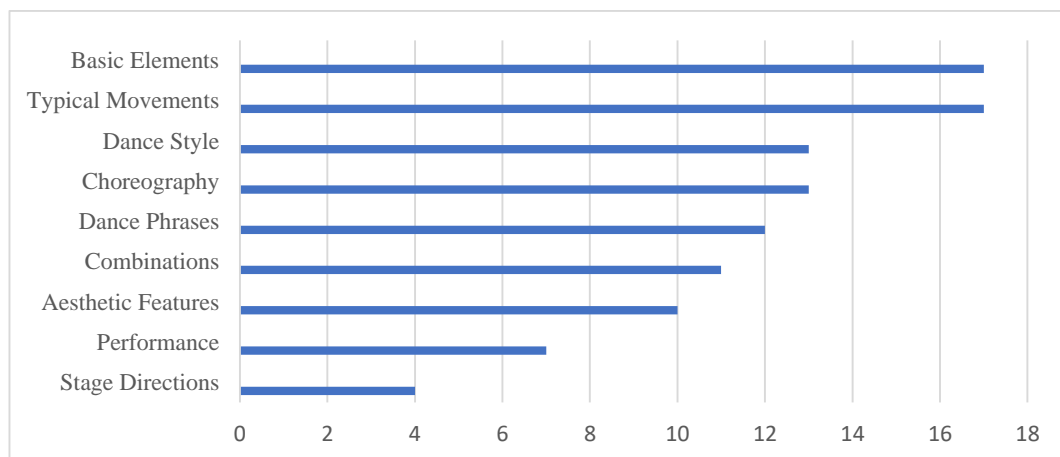


Figure 4. The participants' understanding of the ShenYun technique

D. Local Experts Evaluation of the Final Performance

Table 3 presents the evaluation of the participants' final dance performance by local experts from Malaysia. The most significant impact of the 12 sessions in teaching the Shen Yun dance technique received the highest mean score (M=4.80, SD=0.447), with experts praising the presentation as the “embodiment of basic ShenYun dance technique” (LE1&LE3) and “effective 12 sessions” (LE2&LE5) in helping participants express their feelings through movement. On the other hand, the least preferred categories were Expression (M=4.00, SD=1.000) and Breath (M=3.40, SD=0.894), with local experts commenting on “the need for improvement in breathing and expression to clearly convey the performance” (LE1&LE3).

Table 3: Local Experts' Evaluation

Evaluation	Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Undecided		Agree		Strongly Agree		M	SDV
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%		
Breath					4	80.0			1	20.0	3.40	0.894
Appearance					1	20.0			4	80.0	4.60	0.894
Expression					2	40.0	1	20.0	2	40.0	4.00	1.000
Drive							3	60.0	2	40.0	4.40	0.548
Feasible							3	60.0	2	40.0	4.40	0.548
Significance							1	20.0	4	80.0	4.80	0.447
Outcome							3	60.0	2	40.0	4.40	0.548
Effective							2	40.0	3	60.0	4.60	0.548

E. Chinese Experts Evaluation of the Final Performance

Four Chinese experts evaluated the performance videos of the participants' learning results of ShenYun's dance skills in terms of appearance, expression, drive and rhythm, the four essential ShenYun core points. Experts are very positive about the appearance, drive, and rhythm of the three aspects of the evaluation. As expert 3 comments on “appearance”, “The most basic, important and representative elements of the Shen Yun technique are all presented.” Some participants even showed surprising signs of “drive,” “some participants showed a good sense of exertion and extension in distinguishing between fast and slow movements” (CE1), and “participants have mastered the basic requirements of drive” (CE4). Although there were minor flaws in the participant’s performance of the “rhythm”, “Several participants' arm movements were out of sync with their torso” (CE3), expert 2 still praises the “rhythm” aspect, “The rhythm control is relatively accurate.”

In terms of “expression”, experts give some different comments, “The performance of inner spirit is not sufficient” (CE1), and “There is a lack of integration of movement and breathing” (CE3). Especially when it comes to eye contact and movement, “The position of eyes and hands is not accurate enough when the participants complete the movements (CE1); expert 4 also gave reasons for the lack of expression, “The position of eyes and hands is not accurate enough when the participants complete the movements, the route and spatial direction of the eyes are not accurate, resulting in the inability to express the emotion of the movements.”

Overall, the Chinese experts gave quite high comments on the whole practice, especially on the 12-session practical arrangement of ShenYun dance technique. “The practical teaching steps are arranged reasonably, the teaching objectives are clear, and the teaching effect of 12 sessions is remarkable” (CE1), “The selection of teaching content is reasonable, which can accurately reflect the training objectives of the 12 sessions, and the participants have excellent learning results.” (CE2), “12 sessions allow participants to learn from simple to difficult step by step, which can stimulate

participants' enthusiasm and initiative in learning" (CE4). Expert 3 also recognized the teaching methods used in practice, which is one of the important steps in the learning process, "The teaching process is complete and smooth. After-class reflection enables teachers to get feedback from participants in time, which makes teaching efficient" (CE3).

CONCLUSION

ShenYun technique is an exceptional representative of Chinese culture and the foundation of Chinese classical dance. Its techniques can be a powerful tool for spreading Chinese culture and dance art worldwide. However, there is an obvious lack of research to determine the effectiveness of teaching ShenYun dance technique to international students outside of China. This study aims to evaluate the efficacy of teaching the ShenYun technique by assessing students' understanding, besides evaluating their final performance by dance experts from Malaysia and China. The study's findings indicate that teaching the ShenYun technique to international students is highly effective. This study opens up avenues for future research by educators and researchers to explore the efficacy of the ShenYun dance technique for various age groups and genders.

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